

[Vaudeville, chapter 2]

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No. Words

VAUDEVILLE

CHAPTER 2

[Theatrical Lore?]

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Vaudeville being the melting pot of all theatricalia it is logically to be expected that its folklore would derive much of its color and character from the circus, drama, minstrel, and other amusement forms that preceeded it. But many slang expressions were already obsolete when they were dragged into the variety theatres by old timers from other fields. One such is the scurrilous term "lard actor," an early professional version of "ham actor."

In the early days of the theatre in America theatrical cold cream was not manufactured on a commercial scale; cosmetics were expensive, and often unobtainable in the smaller cities and towns. Cocoa butter was generally used as a basis for make-up, and also for removing it after the performance. But many actors (especially those "palying the sticks" with cheap companies) often used plain lard for removing their stage make-up, sometimes enhancing the odor of mixing in cologne. Later, when cold cream came into general use many actors, for reasons of economy, continued to use lard. The up-to-date Broadway thespians referred to these contemptuously as "lard actors." As used still later the term had no particular reference to make-up, but was used to denote an inferior or low-salaried

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actor. "A lard actor" was also "a ham-fat," and today an indifferent actor is still called "a ham," while a poor performance is often described as "hammy."

"Cork comedian" is a phrase that comes from the minstrel show and the music halls; and was used to describe a minstrel; black-face or 2 Negro comedian. The original method for applying a "black-face" make-up was to hold an ordinary cork over a candle until it was charred and black, which was then rubbed on the face to blacken it for Negro impersonations. During the vaudeville days one could purchase prepared grease paint in every Negroid shade from light tan to coal black. Yet many "Black-face comedians" continued to use the old fashioned burnt cork method for the following excellent reason: A grease paint make-up required scrubbing with hot water and soap for effectual removal, while burnt cork could be easily and quickly washed off with cold water. Besides, a very good make-up could be achieved with corks. And so the term "cork comedian" persisted to some extent throughout the days of vaudeville.

"Olio" while used to indicate a performance given by vaudeville acts, was in reality the name of a piece of scenery. The various curtains on the stage of a theatre are called "drops;" thus we have the "garden drops" "palace drop," "Woods drop," "street drop," etc. The very front curtain, marked "asbestos," as required by city ordinances, is usually called the "fire curtain," or the "house drop," although frequently one heard a stage manager shout "take up the asbestos" to the flyman, i. e. - the stage hand who lowers and raises all curtains and "hanging pieces." The "olio drop" hangs directly behind the "street drop," generally about six to ten feet back from the footlights. In the old traveling burlesque and road show it was customary to have specialty acts perform in front of the "olio drop" while the stage was being "set" for the next act of the show. Sometimes members of the company did these acts in front of the "olio drop" - while the stage hands worked "making the next set" in the rear - while other companies engaged bona fide vaudeville artists to perform their specialties between the acts of the show. These acts might be advertised for (in the theatrical 3 papers) in the following manner: "Wanted.- Acrobatic juggling, and other novelty acts, to work in olio." In time these acts came to be listed in the theatre programs

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under the heading of “OLIO” regardless of the particular stage setting in which they performed. And one performer or showman might remark to another: “The Billy Watson show is carrying a good olio this season.” Which meant, literally, that the Billy Watson show was carrying a good program of vaudeville acts. Thus, the word “olio” came to have two distinct meanings. First, it was the name of a “theatre drops” curtain, or stage setting. Secondly, it was the name adopted for the program of vaudeville acts which performed between the acts of the principal show.

A “bundle actor” was a performer who traveled without trunks, crates, rigging boxes, or any other type of heavy baggage which involved express or excess baggage charges; carrying only hand-bags, valise, suitcases, or other hand luggage. The term “bundle actor” was used in vaudeville more than in any other theatrical field. In other traveling shows, such as dramatic, circus, burlesque, or opera, the management (or owners of the show) paid all transportation and baggage expenses, so it cost the artist nothing for carrying a trunk or two, -providing he had a trunk[.?] But in vaudeville the situation was quite different. Each and every individual act was a little company of itself, sold to the theatre through a booking agency, and every vaudeville act paid for its own transportation, baggage hauling, etc. For this reason many underpaid vaudeville acts traveled without trunks or heavy baggage, and “suitcased it” from town to town. These were the “bundle actors.”

Vaudeville performers were continually “fighting the agents.” If you met a vaudevillian in the evening after he had been “making the rounds” of the booking agents' offices all day, he would never admit that he had been looking for work, making business calls, or negotiating contracts and engagements.

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He would invariably say: “I've been fighting the agents all day.”

When an egotistic performer loitered about the lobby, or the sidewalk in front of the theatre, - perhaps to “date up a town gal” or merely to let the natives know he was an

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actor, - this was called “three-sheeting.” (A three-sheet is a poster measuring 44 by 84 inches.) Managers generally frowned upon this practise, for to permit the public to view the performers in their private characters was supposed to detract from the mystery and glamour of the stage. And so the managers regarded with disfavor certain actors who were addicted to the debunking proclivities known as “three-sheeting in front of the theatre.”

“Up stage” was used to indicate proud and aloof manners. For example: George Hoofer lands a few big time dates and assumes a superior and patronizing attitude towards his old small time comrades, who remark: “George is getting up stage lately.” “Yeah, what has he got to be up stage about?” In the theatre, of course, “down stage” means near the footlights, while “up stage” has reference to the rear of the stage, towards the “back drop.” And an artist naturally works “up stage” or “down stage” according to the demands of the vehicle in which he is performing. But what meaning the original term “up stage” could possibly bear in relation to a swelled head is a mystery. And yet “up stage” is a common term in the theatre for pride and hauteur.

“High hat,” another term used in the same sense, is quite obvious. For example: John Juggler, who has been performing in white flannels, or other cheap costume, appears in new wardrobe presenting his act in a full dress suit and top hat, i. e. - a “high hat.” This new ensemble indicates greater prestige, apparent prosperity, and a professional advance. Other vaudevillians, upon commenting upon it might remark: “I see John has gone high hat.”

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Generally the term was used as slang, something like this: “Listen, I’m just as good as you are, so don’t try to high hat me.”

“Milking the audience.” Here was a disgusting habit to which many performers were addicted in the old vaudeville days. It is comprehensible, of course, that all artists relished a maximum tumult of applause at the conclusion of their performance. All, in fact, that

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an audience could be induced, begged, or cajoled to bestow upon them. And there were practical methods of encouraging an audience to continue applauding long after a vaudeville act should have retired to give place to the following number. And this method was known as “milking 'em,” or “milking the customers.” The tried and true orthodox method of “milking 'em” was as follows:

Let us suppose that a man and woman team have finished their act and “bow off,” one on either side of the stage, while the orchestra plays their exit music. The audience applauds, and they return to bow in acknowledgement. All of which is a perfectly legitimate procedure. But now the process of “milking 'em” commences. Before the applause completely subsides the woman quickly leaves the stage, while the man remains before the audience with a assumed air of uncertainty, as if speculating upon the question of an encore. Soon he exits reluctantly, but by this time the woman has returned to the stage, where she stands bowing and smiling, gesticulating for the man to come out and do an encore. Finally she retires again with apparent reluctance. But before her exit is complete the man is again out on the stage, bowing and motioning for her to come out for an encore. The object is, of course, never to leave the stage empty for an instant. Although their act is finished and they should have retired, they contrive that on or the other is always before the footlights to encourage the audience to continue applauding. If the applause shows signs of “dying out” the performers at once bring it up again with a mute show of appealing, one to the other, as if to say: “Come on, let's give ‘em an encore.” Through clever cooperation a team might keep the spectators applauding for several minutes, thus getting credit (on the managers report sheet) for “stopping the show,” to the utter disgust of the next act which is standing in the wings, ready to go on, and muttering: “Aw, come on. Get off the stage and quit milking 'em.”